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CIA Reportedly Suspends Officer for Aiding Contras

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WASHINGTON—The CIA has suspended a covert operations officer who used agency helicopters in Honduras to carry supplies to Nicaraguan rebels when U.S. aid to the contras was illegal, intelligence sources said Thursday.

The suspension is the second disciplinary action against a CIA officer stemming from the Iran-contra scandal and the first tangible result of an internal investigation by the agency into secret operations in Honduras during the ban on contra aid. The CIA suspended its station chief in Costa Rica last winter.

The CIA helicopters, which operated from a Honduran air base, secretly delivered explosives and other supplies to contra forces during early 1986 and evacuated wounded contras from the battle-

field, according to U.S. and contra sources. It was illegal for the CIA to deliver supplies or provide any tactical aid to contra military operations until last October.

According to two Americans who worked with the contras, the CIA helicopters also went inside Nicaragua on several occasions—another potential violation of the law. But U.S. officials said the officers involved denied that the helicopters had crossed the border.

Initially, the CIA flatly denied that any of its officers were involved in aiding the contras during the period of the congressional ban, from October, 1984, until October, 1986. But investigations by both the CIA's inspector general and the congressional committees investigating the Iran-contra scandal

"We're working our way up the ladder, rung by rung," one investigator said.

The clandestine agent who has been suspended, sources said, was the "chief of base" supervising CIA operations in support of the contras in Honduras—a man who used the nom de guerre "Stuart," according to one source.

Humanitarian Concerns Cited

The agent told investigators that he acted not on orders from his CIA superiors or from White House aide Oliver L. North, who directed efforts to support the contras but out of humanitarian concern for the contras, one knowledgeable official said.

"He said he was brought up to believe that you don't leave your wounded on the battlefield," a sentiment that spurred him to volunteer his help when the airlift to supply the rebels bogged down, the official said.

CIA spokeswoman Kathy Phares said that she could not comment on the reported suspension. She repeated the agency's denial that any high-level CIA officials in Washington were linked to the contras' private aid network.

The CIA has said that it informed employees three times of a "long-standing policy" of avoiding dealings with persons supplying the contras.

Also under scrutiny, sources said, is a CIA official who worked in Honduras under the name of "Big George."

The secret CIA operations in Honduras, officials said, were potentially much larger than Fernandez's operation in Costa Rica. The contras' largest bases are in Honduras, and CIA helicopters frequently shuttled between the main U.S.-Honduran air base at Palmerola, the main contra air base at Aguacate and areas along the border with Nicaragua.

Critical of CIA Help

In testimony before the congressional committees, however, several figures involved in Secord's

private airlift have complained that they received little help from CIA officers in Honduras.

"Joe [Fernandez] was critical to us throughout the operation, and Joe remained involved with us throughout the operation," retired Army Col. Robert C. Dutton, a Secord aide, testified on Wednesday.

"At other times, we would try to enlist Vince, who was chief of station in [Honduras], and he was not helpful sometimes. In September [1986], he was more helpful to us than he had been before. We got a little more assistance from them as far as intelligence but nothing of any great significance."

Investigators are trying to determine whether more senior officials were involved in directing the operations, including the CIA station chief in Honduras, who has been identified in congressional testimony as "Vince," Alan D. Fiers Jr., chief of the agency's Central America Task Force, and Clair George, the agency's deputy director for operations.

Key Role of Station Chief

One official said that the agency's internal accounting procedures would have made it "virtually impossible" for CIA officers in Honduras to aid the contras in any substantial way without the knowledge of the station chief. The agency's financial controls were reportedly made especially rigid in Central America—precisely because of congressional fears that CIA officers would illegally funnel aid to the contras.

"The system of accountability is such that you can't run helicopters between Aguacate and a contra drop zone for any amount of time without higher-ups knowing about it," the official said. "The chief of station is responsible for all activity in the country—and that includes helicopter movements, because they cost fuel, and fuel costs money."

The CIA already has suspended Joe Fernandez, its former chief of station in Costa Rica who used the

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slowly turned up a handful of lower-level agents who confessed to secret work on behalf of the rebels.

Now, sources say, the CIA and congressional investigations have turned to the issue of who authorized and directed the illicit operations and whether knowledge of the secret contra aid extended to the agency's higher levels.

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name Tomas Castillo, for his part in aiding the secret contra airlift run by North and retired Air Force Maj. Gen. Richard V. Secord. Fernandez is scheduled to testify before the House and Senate committees investigating the scandal in closed session today.

Fernandez was recalled to Washington and suspended with pay last winter after admitting "unauthorized contacts" with the private operators of the contras' military supply pipeline. An internal CIA investigation initially cleared Fernandez of any serious violation of agency policy but evidence later showed that he had relayed key data on weapons air-drops to operators of the supply network, using a computer coding device supplied by North.

Recants Story

Last year, Fernandez told colleagues that his activities were fully approved by senior CIA officials, including Fiers and George. But Fernandez later recanted that story and adopted an explanation close to that of the Honduras officers—that he acted without the knowledge of most, if not all, of his superiors.

CIA officials had planned this spring to dismiss or retire Fernandez from agency service but sources say he has been told more recently that his career will be salvaged.

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